

Blackt Up!

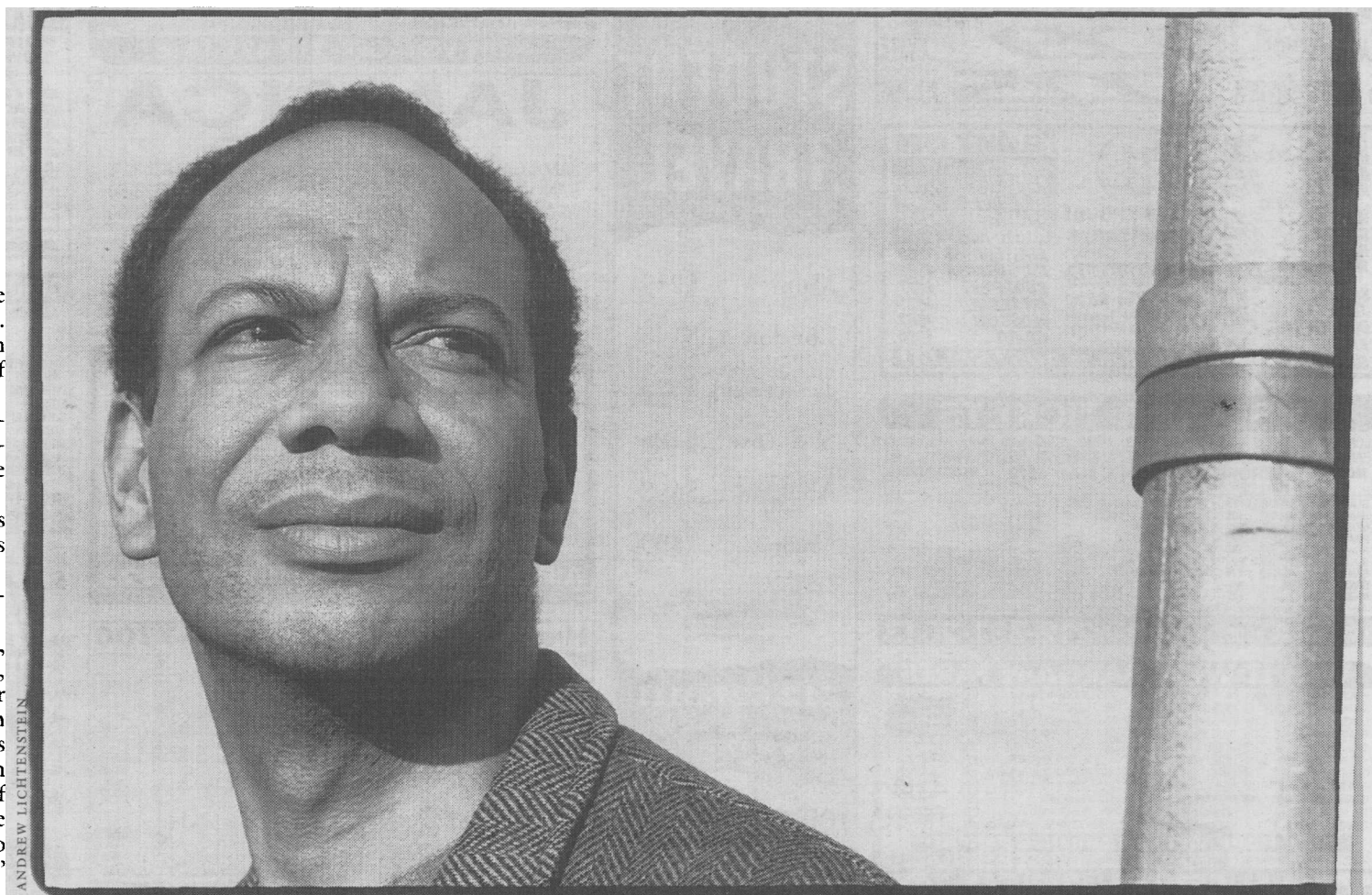
African Americans Confront Their Worst Health Crisis: AIDS

By Mark Schoofs

Except possibly for slavery, nothing in our history will have killed so many black people in such a short time as AIDS," says Mario Cooper. About 100 African American leaders gathered at Harvard last week and heard the facts that led him to this staggering conclusion:

- HIV kills more black Americans in the prime of their life, age 25 to 44, than any other cause.
- One out of five deaths among black women in this age group is caused by AIDS; one out of three among black men.
- Blacks comprise just 12 per cent of America's population but 40 per cent of all AIDS cases, more than half the female cases, and more than 60 per cent of children with AIDS.
- Blacks are six times more likely than whites to be infected with HIV, and twice as likely as Hispanics.
- Already, 300,000 to 500,000 African Americans are estimated to be infected with HIV.

Cooper, who is black and HIV-positive, knows these statistics by heart. But to his mind, there is something even worse: "Almost all our leaders—business, political, church—have been appallingly silent." Cooper toiled for two years to organize last week's conference. Like an AIDS Cassandra, he would say, "Hundreds of thousands of our people will be dying in the next 10 years." But usually, he was offered no support, or only token gestures. "At times," Cooper says, "it brought me to tears."



Mario Cooper of the Harvard AIDS Institute, which organized last week's black leadership conference: "Almost all our leaders have been silent."

At the conference, prominent black health officials—such as David Satcher, director of the Centers for Disease Control, and Children's Defense Fund president Marian Wright Edelman—joined veteran black AIDS activists to call for a major African American effort to combat HIV. But the right people still were not listening. "This conference was supposed to be for opinion makers who have *not* been involved in AIDS," New York's Reverend Canon Frederick Williams reminded the assembly. "Where are they today?"

Not one member of the Congressional Black Caucus attended, though conference organizers said all had been invited. Kweisi Mfume, executive director of the NAACP, and Hugh Price, president of the National Urban League, lent their names to the conference, but neither showed. "It's outrageous," fumed Alvin Poussaint, the normally circumspect psychiatrist and black health advocate who cochaired the meeting. "They have done nothing."

Indeed, National Urban League spokesman Lee Daniels told the *Voice* the group is "not involved in any way in AIDS." NAACP youth director Jamal Bryant admitted, "We have 500 youth councils and 250 college chapters, but we haven't made any real effort to educate young people." Finally, scores of black newspapers were informed of the conference, but a *Voice* survey of 13 of the largest papers revealed that only one plans to cover it.

Meanwhile, 65 African Americans get diagnosed with HIV every day. If it continues to

spread unchecked, by the year 2001 more than half of all Americans with AIDS will be black.

"We've been talking about the blacking and browning of this epidemic since 1986," noted Beny Primm, a leading AIDS doctor. But many African Americans are still not addressing it, partly because their hands are already full. "In a project, they hear shots every night," explains Norm Nickens, who chairs the National Minority AIDS Council. "That's real and immediate. When you say there's a disease out there that may kill you in 10 years, well, that goes right by."

Even before AIDS exploded, black men in Harlem had a lower life expectancy than men in Bangladesh. But AIDS is no longer just another problem. It currently kills twice as many young black men as homicide, the next leading killer. And the present AIDS toll is merely a prelude; the ballyhooed new drugs almost cer-

tainly do not cure the disease, and even if they did, says Cooper, "most of our people are not going to have access to these drugs, so we know what their life expectancy is going to be."

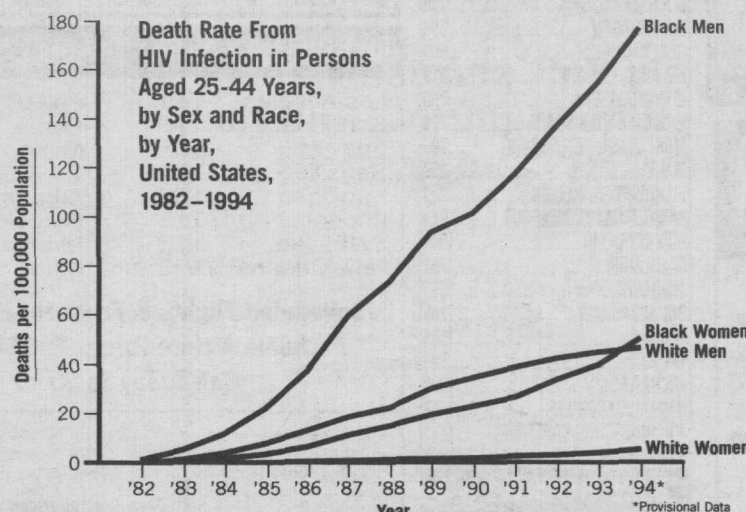
"We need to make AIDS the moral equivalent of civil rights," Poussaint told the *Voice*. "But that's hard to do, given the stigma of the disease." In the black community, the ravages of drugs have produced a particular revulsion toward addicts. One AIDS professional, who requested anonymity, said she received funding to open a case-management office in a "neighbor-

hood that has a high crime rate and a lot of drug use." But the mostly black residents have thwarted the project: "They're saying, 'We don't want more addicts.'" The result? The money has been sitting in a bank, unused, for almost a year.

IV-drug use is the primary conduit of HIV among African Americans, but sex between men runs a close second. "I want to come down hard on our leaders about their homophobia," says author Henry Louis Gates Jr., head of Harvard's influential black studies department and cochair of last week's conference. "It's an embarrassment to be a black person when the leadership is not countering homophobia."

Gates draws a parallel with prejudice among whites, and despising homosexuals and addicts is, indeed, as American as apple pie. But Keith Cylar, a founder of the AIDS organization Housing Works, says racism can make it even harder for blacks to embrace outcasts. To counter white bigotry, he explains, African Americans often try to present a flawless image. Anyone who deviates from that ideal—such as those who are at highest risk for HIV—face extra ostracism for "betraying the race." Then there is the widespread fear that if the truth about who is getting AIDS is known, whites will use it as another club to pummel blacks.

Black churches, probably the most powerful force in African American culture, have been particularly reluctant to launch AIDS prevention programs. But many ministers are changing their ways. Pernessia Seale, who found- ➤➤



Blacks far outnumber whites in per capita AIDS cases, according to the CDC.

Schoofs

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ed The Balm In Gilead, an organization devoted to mobilizing black churches, recalls the end of a retreat she organized last February. "There were some real hard ministers, but at the end, when we stood up and held hands, some of them began to cry. One dropped to his knees and began to repent for how he had treated people with AIDS, gay people and addicts. He had kicked them out of his church, and now he asked God to forgive him for condemning instead of healing. Other ministers began to drop to their knees, too, saying, 'I've been wrong. Oh God, forgive me.'"

Seele is organizing a December 4 fundraiser

with Jessye Norman. Even though the opera diva will be joined by a cast of high-voltage stars—including Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Elton John—Seele has had trouble raising money. "Many corporations have turned us down, saying, 'I only support the Gay Men's Health Crisis,'" she says. Nor has support from black-owned companies yet been what she was hoping for.

Seele is savvy and well-connected. For most black organizations, the struggle is much harder. At the conference, experts from across the country described a common profile of black AIDS agencies: Most have been founded only within the last few years. They operate in poor neighborhoods, so they lack access to a donor base and depend almost exclusively on ever-shrinking government contracts. Funders do not understand minority communities, and gay

white organizations bid for the same money.

Finally, black AIDS agencies are often not mentored or supported by the mainstream African American community. Ronald Johnson, Mayor Giuliani's AIDS policy chief, says the consequences can be severe. "We've encountered agencies that didn't keep a general ledger, because no one on their board knew how to keep books. Now, GMHC had financial wizards on the board—they had bankers, for God's sake. For too long, a black banker wouldn't come within 10 feet of an AIDS organization."

The epidemic will continue to devastate African Americans unless more black physicians commit to specializing in AIDS, lawyers to providing pro bono services, and business people to serving on agency boards. Some activists are already building such a support network. "I got so tired of receiving rejection notices for grants, and

fighting with gay men and others, that we just started doing it ourselves," says the Reverend Edwin Sanders, pastor of a church in Nashville, Tennessee. "We carry on our programs without any major funding from anyone else."

Sanders belongs to a council of 32 local churches, and he has convinced most of them to launch their own AIDS-prevention programs. Recently, he took a particularly bold step: He started a needle exchange program. Among blacks, who have watched drugs decimate their communities, this is especially controversial. For a church to operate the program is unheard of. What does Sanders say to critics? "I can still work with folks who are alive. I can still minister to folks who are alive."

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